



# Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

*A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living*

Doctrinal Catechesis Session  
Mary Birmingham

## MORAL DECISION-MAKING



Sermon on the Mount, by Carl Heinrich Bloch, Danish Painter, died 1890. Public domain.



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday liturgy.

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

### Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you, Lord, as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.



### Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session. Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that are best suited for your particular group.



## Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the *Breaking Open the Word* worksheet for this week.

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the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT  
Rev. Steven Olds  
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR  
† Most Rev. John Noonan  
Bishop of Orlando

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## Sharing Human Experience

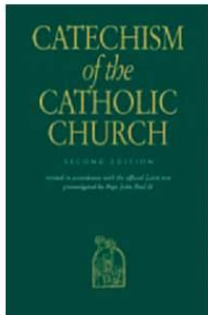
Catechist begins this session with these or similar opening remarks:

Today we will address the issue of moral decision making. How do we determine if our actions are moral or not? The Church guides and leads us in this process.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups. Remind participants to make time for all in the group to respond.

- ▶ Think of a very difficult decision you had to make your life.
- ▶ What went into your decision-making process?
- ▶ In what way, if any, did you prepare yourself to make this decision?

Catechist shares an experience from his or her own life in order to focus the question. See appendix #1. Catechist uses their responses to launch into a discussion about moral decision making.



## Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Refer to articles 1776-1802

Catechist continues:

- ▶ Some Catholics of the past had one word to describe the Church, and that word was “institution.” When the Church set out to define itself at the Second Vatican Council, that all changed. The Church Fathers determined that “institution ” is an extremely narrow vision of Church. The Church in its fullness is so much more than an institution.
- ▶ The Church Fathers provided images and metaphors to describe the essence of Church and to keep us from being boxed in to one narrow way of thinking.
- ▶ Such images and metaphors required the use of our imagination. Yet in spite of the effectiveness of such metaphors and images, they are not without limits. While a metaphor comes close to the reality, it never quite *is* the reality.

- ▶ Metaphors simply help us unlock the layers of mystery contained within that which the metaphor attempts to describe.
- ▶ Theologians have created certain metaphors that help us explain the many dimensions of morality and our response to it. Many people think that morality is nothing more than a set of rules, regulations, and the necessary requirement to obey them. Morality is so much more than that.
- ▶ Theologians have explored various models to help us understand the way in which our understanding of morality has developed and how we have developed in relation to morality.
- ▶ Legal model. The first metaphor or model is the legal model. This is the oldest model and flows from society's need to organize itself. Rules help maintain peace and harmony within the society. Rules are to be followed. If they are not followed, there are consequences and punishment.
- ▶ This legal model was and is so ingrained in people's consciousness that morality became synonymous with the law. Everything was, and for the most part is today, understood by many within the context of the legal system.
  - Within that legal context, therefore, God is the lawgiver and human beings are obliged to obey.
  - Within this legal system there exist divine law and natural law.
  - There are rewards and punishments in the here and the hereafter.
  - The believer must obey.
  - Extreme disobedience results in expulsion from the Church.

### Some limitations to this model

- ▶ Scrupulosity and circumvention. When an institution creates a large body of laws, there is always the presence of two extremes in response to those laws.
- ▶ One extreme is scrupulosity and flows from a fear of not perfectly following the law. (For example, one woman felt she needed to go to the sacrament of reconciliation every day in order to take care of the sins she committed immediately after the sacrament and occurring within that twenty-four hour period.)
- ▶ The other extreme seeks to circumvent the law. Such persons ask how much they can get away with before they commit a sin.
- ▶ The legal system, while nevertheless necessary, also gives rise to other extreme responses. When an institution imposes rigid observance of the law (much like the Pharisees of the New Testament, who required that faithful Jews follow over 600 specific laws, many of them extremely burdensome to poor peasants) the response is often a rebellious questioning of the authority behind the law. The law then is perceived as oppressive and burdensome.
- ▶ Relativism. However, today we are faced with a different extreme response. Some people have relativized the legal nature of the law. For them the law is not the heart of morality; they do not believe that morality should be legislated. The sentiment for them becomes: "No one should tell me what I should or should not

do. If I am an adult and it feels right to me, then I am the one who determines if it is right for me or not.” Some see this posture as liberating in that it provides the adult with the freedom to act responsibly and with personal conviction.

- ▶ A truly mature adult, however, comes to understand that while law is not the central component in morality, it is a necessary component of it, a necessary balance to freedom.
- ▶ In spite of some obvious limitations to the legal model of morality, it is important to note that society will always need agreed-upon norms and values that uphold the common good and those norms must and do drive our values.

## Other models of morality

### The Love Model

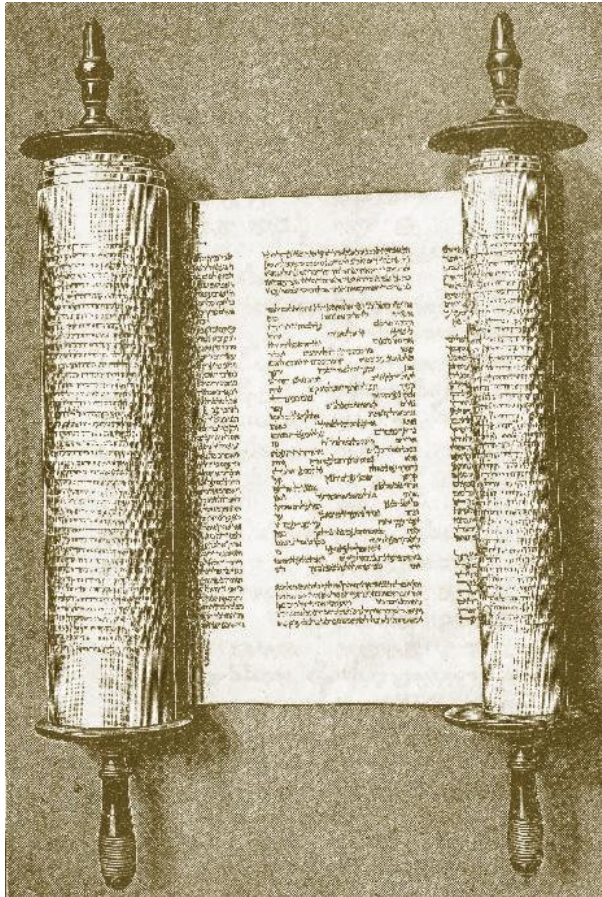
- ▶ Another model of morality is rooted in love. The gospel mandate to love one another, the two great commandments, is the heart of the Beatitudes, the new law Jesus handed down at his Sermon on the Mount.
- ▶ Such love is directed toward others.
- ▶ Love-based morality insists that the love Jesus taught us by word and example should drive our moral responses to all life situations.
- ▶ However, this model has its limitations. It is not always easy to determine what the most loving action is in a given situation. WWJD (What would Jesus do?) does not always work. Or worse, we use our own criteria of morality and put it squarely on Jesus’ shoulders in order to give divine acceptance to our own narrow (often anti-gospel) way of thinking.
  - For example, a televangelist once used WWJD to defend his support of the death penalty. He failed to consider the reality that Jesus promoted a gospel of non-violence and that he himself was an innocent victim of the death penalty!
- ▶ When confronted with the love model’s limitations, we always revert back to the legal model that we know and that works so well.
- ▶ It is not that the love model is not full of the best intentions; it simply fails us when it comes to determining the right thing to do in many life circumstances.

### The Discipleship Model

- ▶ The discipleship model of morality is based on an intimate, reciprocal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- ▶ Commissioned followers of Christ follow the example of the New Testament and join with other Christians in community to establish the reign of God in their midst.
- ▶ Such a model is a welcomed change from the rigidity of the legal model.
- ▶ Much discernment happens within the context of community as it seeks to live out the gospel in day-to-day life situations.
- ▶ However, just as the love model falls short, there are no clear directives given to address the complex situations that Christians face.



- ▶ What is lacking are concrete answers to what is morally right or wrong.
- ▶ While love and discipleship are good foundations for living the moral life, more is needed.



An engraving of the scroll of the Pentateuch. British Library Add. MS. 4, 707. Plate X. The S.S. Teacher's Edition: The Holy Bible. New York: Henry Frowde, Publisher to the University of Oxford, 1896.

## The Inner Conviction Model or Moral Conscience Model

- ▶ In this model we joyfully accept personal responsibility for living according to accepted moral norms.
- ▶ When Moses gave the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, we often think that they were given this difficult code by which to order their lives, when in truth the people of Israel understood the Ten Commandments to be their joyful reciprocal response to the love, care, and nurturing shown to them by God, a God with whom they shared a covenant relationship.
- ▶ In this inner conviction or moral conscience model, directives of the law guide us, but we choose to make a personal mature commitment to live by the Law's imperative.
- ▶ The law is not imposed; it is embraced. The law is embraced in response to our love relationship with the God who is in covenant relationship with us.
- ▶ In this model the law drives our values and becomes the basis of our moral decision making, our moral conscience.

- ▶ In this model we do not follow the law out of fear or blind obedience.
- ▶ We follow the law out of a mature commitment to live an authentic life of integrity, a life informed by moral norms that are freely embraced and lived.
- ▶ In this model people act in complete freedom of choice—the freedom to say, “Yes,” to God.
- ▶ Conscience is not simply the tool within us to determine if we should do the right thing and avoid the immoral or wrong thing.
- ▶ Conscience drives our entire approach to life. It helps us discover God’s divine design for our lives; it helps us discover who we are, how we are to live, and God’s ultimate will for our lives.
- ▶ Conscience is developed (or not) from childhood as we learn to obey the rules and norms of society. It grows and develops as we learn that such norms are for the good of all people and that a well-ordered society is in the best interest of everyone. I follow all the traffic laws not just because it is the law, but because I care about the welfare of other citizens.
- ▶ Conscience achieves its highest level when we act not because of some obligation to follow the law, but because it is the right and moral thing to do.
- ▶ We develop a good conscience over time by creating the habit of good behavior.
- ▶ When we habitually tell the truth, we become known not just as a truthful person, but we learn to discern truthfulness and the lack of it in specific life situations.
- ▶ The same can be said of all the virtues—justice, prudence, temperance, and courage. We learn those virtues by living them. When we live them and they become a part of our moral fiber, we, in the process, become better persons, not just generally but in relation to each of the virtues. We become prudent, just, temperate, courageous people.
- ▶ Aristotle insisted that morality is judged by the judgment of a morally virtuous person, not simply by a code of law or ethics.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in the wider group.

- ▶ Since relativism is an issue that causes the Church great concern today, let us ask ourselves the following questions.
- ▶ Can you hear yourself saying what the relativistic approach says? “No one should tell me what to do or not do. I am an adult. If it feels right to me, it is OK.”
- ▶ What have you heard thus far that would be a response to that attitude?
- ▶ Why is that attitude not good for the individual or for society?

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in dyads then invites insights in the wider group.

- ▶ The last model, the inner conviction or moral conscience model, is a healthy balance between the legal model of morality and a loosely defined love and discipleship model.
- ▶ How would you summarize that model, and how difficult or easy do you think it would be to embrace it?

## Forming a good conscience

- ▶ The definition of “conscience” is that it is a “judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete action” (CCC, #1796).
- ▶ God has placed a moral law in every human heart. That moral law is the human conscience. Conscience is our ability to know what is right and what is wrong.
- ▶ Conscience helps us discern what we should do in particular circumstances.
- ▶ Conscience helps persons assume responsibility for their own actions (CCC, #1781).
- ▶ When a person chooses to engage in an evil act, the conscience stands in constant judgment and witness of that act.
- ▶ The human conscience holds out the hope of mercy and forgiveness in admitting to the evil and challenges the person to turn away from evil and turn toward virtue.
- ▶ We make moral choices guided by our conscience. We either follow or we reject God’s law. A good conscience adheres to reason and to what is willed by God’s wisdom.
- ▶ It takes a lifetime to form one’s conscience. Every Catholic is required to form his or her conscience according to the Church’s moral norms.

## What tools are used to form a moral conscience?

- ▶ Scriptures assist us in forming our conscience (CCC, #1785).
- ▶ Do our actions conform to the Word of God?
- ▶ When we pray, study, and live according to biblical principles, we are strengthened to live the moral life; we follow the teaching of Christ in the Scriptures.
- ▶ While a little cliché, overused, and abused (see above), WWJD is nevertheless a wise axiom: What would Jesus do? Such a principle guides our actions.
- ▶ Study is required, however, in accord with biblical interpretation. We can be in error when it comes to Scripture if we read it in a literal, fundamentalist way.
  - For example, there is a scene in the movie “Roots” in which the landowner is reading the Bible about slaves being obedient to their masters. As he is reading the Bible inside, his runaway slave Toby is having his foot cut off as punishment for running away outside. The landowner is using the Bible as the authority to justify his punitive action. Scripture must be read with the authoritative lens of the Church and biblical interpretation if we are to authentically use it as a tool for discerning our moral actions.
- ▶ Moral counsel of others helps us form our moral conscience.
- ▶ Moral advice and the example of other faithful Christians help us to form our conscience.
- ▶ The authoritative teaching of the Church helps us form a moral conscience.
- ▶ We honestly and with open mind and heart try to embrace the guidance and teaching of the Church, and in so doing we form a moral conscience.
- ▶ Gifts of the Holy Spirit strengthen us to form a moral conscience.
- ▶ We believe those gifts are given to us in the sacrament of confirmation, in which



we are given a special outpouring of strength by the Holy Spirit. That strength takes the form of the following gifts:

- Wisdom: the gift that allows us to grow in faith and embrace divine truth; it allows us to have good judgment about the truth and to meditate on the things of God.
  - Understanding: the gift that helps us understand, grasp, and be certain of our faith—the teachings of our Catholic faith.
  - Counsel: the gift that helps us intuitively know what is right and to have the confidence to courageously defend the truth.
  - Fortitude: the gift that provides the strength to act in accord with the truth, the courage to stand up for what is right even when to do so is difficult.
  - Knowledge: the gift that gifts us with the certitude of the truth of God. Whereas wisdom is the desire to know the truth and things of God, knowledge is actually knowing the truth and the things of God.
  - Piety: the gift whereby the Holy Spirit prompts us to lovingly serve and give honor, praise, and worship to God.
  - Fear of the Lord: the gift that provides us with both a healthy fear that we will turn our backs on God whom we love and do not want to disappoint, and the hope that God's grace will provide the necessary strength to keep us from doing so.
- ▶ Such gifts help us to form our conscience; to know good when we see it; to do good when we are compelled to do good, even when that causes us harm or difficulty; to seek what is right in all things.
  - ▶ Examination of conscience helps us to form our moral conscience:
  - ▶ This is the frequent and honest examination of our lives, our actions, the motives for our actions, the value of our actions (are they good and upright, or are they unjust, evil, or wrong?), the choices we intend to make, and the choices we have made. Such an evaluation helps us form a moral conscience.

## What constitutes a moral action?

### Moral Acts

- ▶ In order to form a moral conscience, we must understand what constitutes a moral action. Every moral action has three parts:
  1. what we do (the act)
  2. the intention, why we do the act
  3. the actual situation of the act, such as where and when it takes place, how the act is carried out, with whom it is carried out, and the consequences of the act
- ▶ An act is moral if the act is by itself a good thing to do, a good action. (Some things are by nature intrinsically bad, and thus the act itself is not a moral act, such as murder, rape, or torture. The reason for doing such acts makes no difference. The act, in and of itself, is immoral.)
- ▶ An action is morally good if the action itself is a good action and if the person doing the act has a good intention.

- ▶ If the person carries out a good action, but has an evil intention or does it for an evil purpose, it is not a moral action because the person's intention for doing it was evil in the first place. Several examples:
  - A man had an affair with another man's wife. The man having the affair decides to apologize to the other man for having the affair. He makes such an apology in hopes that the man will ultimately leave his wife and the wife will decide to stay with him. The act itself (apologizing and asking for forgiveness) could be classified as a moral action, a good thing. However, it is an immoral action for two reasons. First, the man's intention is to break up the marriage; his intention is evil. Second, the consequences would also result in an evil thing—it would break up a marriage and family. Thus, two out of the three elements that constitute a moral action are evil in and of themselves even though the action itself— forgiveness and apology—could be a good thing.
  - Coworkers ostracize another coworker and make working conditions unbearable for this person. Under the guise of offering a hand of forgiveness and friendship, the coworkers delegate one of their members to reach out to the ostracized worker so as to investigate whether or not this person reported them to management.
- ▶ The Church also insists that we can never do something wrong or evil in order to bring about a good (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, p. 312). The end does not justify the means. A person may not rob a bank to give money to the poor. The act itself was an evil act, even if the intention was good.

Catechist invites participants to summarize what they heard in the wider group: How do we form a moral conscience?

- ▶ What have we heard thus far?
- ▶ How do we form a moral conscience?
- ▶ What is a moral action?

Catechist leads an exercise (about 10 minutes). Break participants into small groups and appoint a spokesperson to answer for the group at the end of the exercise. Introduce the exercise using these or similar words:

Let us take an imaginary issue drawn from our own headlines today. You will need to put your political opinions off to the side and simply respond to the situation on the moral merits. That is difficult because very often our political beliefs are as strong as our religious beliefs. Let us simply have fun with this and use the criteria set forth by the Church. (Write the following criteria on poster paper for use as their guide.)

- ✓ How do I personally feel about this issue?
- ✓ What does my gut tell me the moral thing to do would be?
- ✓ What does secular law tell us?
- ✓ What does Scripture teach us?
- ✓ What does the Church teach us about this issue?
- ✓ Is it a moral act?

Let us consider the following imaginary scenario:

- ✓ You are a health care worker.
- ✓ An illegal immigrant brings a sick family member to your office.
- ✓ The family has no insurance. They are here illegally. They are breaking the law, yet here they are, presenting themselves to you for help.
- ✓ Let us say, for argument's sake, that a newly-passed law requires that such care not be given to an illegal immigrant.

Using all the criteria we just talked about, how would you go about determining the moral response to such a situation? Appoint a spokesperson to report back to the group. What we are looking for here is the process you would undergo to decide what your moral response should be.

Note for catechist: The goal here is to get them to be open to align their own response with a response informed by Scriptures and Church's teaching. Thus, after they are finished reporting back what the process would be, you will need to help them connect their process to the process you outlined. Do not give them the right moral answer. That is not what we are looking for. That is for them to determine for themselves. What we are looking for is for them to outline a process. Thus, the first step would be:

- ✓ How do I personally feel about this issue?
- ✓ What does my gut tell me the moral thing to do would be?
- ✓ What does secular law tell us?
- ✓ What does Scripture teach us?
- ✓ What does the Church teach us about this issue?
- ✓ Is it a moral act?

For example: Welcoming the alien and foreigner in biblical parlance is the same as welcoming God himself. It is true that Jesus says to render unto Caesar what is Caesars, but it is also true that one cannot look to the Scriptures without realizing that Jesus always reaches out to the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. When the law gets in the way of such compassionate action, Jesus challenged the law, such as the Sabbath laws that put burdens on the people and kept the poor from providing for their families. One needs to consider both perspectives.

- ✓ What does the Church teach us? Participants might not have access to the Church's stand on immigration issues. However, the Church is in favor of immigration reform. It is not the kind of reform we hear of in the press, however. The Church favors a compassionate path to citizenship. The Church decries the practice of splitting families apart. The Church also insists that the path to citizenship not be overly burdensome. In the end, the Church comes down on the side of offering care to those who are in need when necessary.

The bottom line in this exercise is to drive home the point that arriving at a moral decision is not easy and requires a process, study, an open heart, and a community within which to reflect.

## Conscience is the highest order

- ▶ St. John Neumann reminded us that our conscience is the highest moral indicator. We are to follow our conscience above all else.
- ▶ Human beings have the right to act in freedom according to their conscience. They may not be forced to act contrary to their conscience, especially when it comes to religious issues (CCC, #1782).
- ▶ As human beings we are required to act according to our conscience. However it is possible that our conscience is not properly formed and thus remains in ignorance and, in such cases, is subject to making false judgment about the morality of certain actions (CCC, #1790).
- ▶ This occurs when the person does little or nothing to inform his or her conscience and simply acts blindly.
- ▶ This same blindness occurs due to the habit of sin, which makes it difficult for us to

see the culpability of our actions.

- ▶ Faith, prayer, and the word of God enlighten our conscience.

### Conscience is not the same as “my opinion”

- ▶ We can be fooled into thinking that our opinion constitutes our upright, moral conscience. This is false.
- ▶ For us to simply say,
  - I am going to do this act regardless of what the Church teaches, or
  - I am not going to do this act regardless of what the Church teaches, or
  - I believe in this or that belief or teaching regardless of what the Church teaches, or
  - I do not believe in this or that belief or teaching regardless of what the Church teaches,
- ▶ without
  - entering into serious study about the issue, the reason for the teaching, the history, what is behind the teaching, theological opinions for and against an issue,
  - scouring the Scriptures for discernment,
  - calling on the gifts of the Spirit to open our minds and hearts to the Church’s position on a given issue or teaching,
  - honestly and openly trying to embrace the teaching,
  - examining the motives and reasons for believing or acting,
  - prayerfully asking God to embrace the teaching,
  - seeking advice and counsel regarding the teaching,
- ▶ is not to act “in good conscience,” but is to act falsely.
- ▶ If after that entire, extended process, a person still cannot in “good conscience” embrace a certain teaching of the Church (as long as it does not constitute divine revelation, that is, anything that is expressed or revealed in the Sacraments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the Beatitudes, and the Ten Commandments – the hierarchy of truths), then an informed conscience is the higher moral code.
- ▶ Important: It should be extremely rare that a person would not be in accord with Church teaching on an issue if the previous process was fully, honestly entered into and adhered to. It is enjoined upon every Catholic to embrace all the teachings of the Church.

### What are the hierarchy of truths?

Refer here to the section on the hierarchy of truths from the *National Directory for Catechesis*, pp. 84-85. Here is what it says are most central to our faith:

- ▶ Christian message: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Creator of all things, mystery of Christ, born of Virgin Mary, and who suffered, died, and rose for our salvation; the mystery of the Holy Spirit, who is present in the Church, sanctifying it, purifying it, and guiding it until Jesus returns, the mystery of the Church, Christ’s mystical body and the Virgin Mary who holds a preeminent place.



- ▶ Baptism, one baptism, the foundational sacrament of Christian life that celebrates and incorporates us into Christ's life, death, and resurrection, thus saving us; and which invites us to participate in the mission of Christ to establish the reign of God on earth.
- ▶ The history of salvation centered in Christ.
- ▶ The Apostles' Creed as a summary of and a key to reading all of the Church's doctrine.
- ▶ The sacraments that constitute the fullness of God's grace, yet each sacrament having its own vital role and function.
- ▶ The Eucharist is the preeminent sacrament; all other sacraments flow to and from it.
- ▶ The two great commandments are the center of Jesus moral teaching—love of God and neighbor as one's self, which sum up the Ten Commandments lived in the spirit of the Beatitudes.
- ▶ The Lord's Prayer as the synthesis and summary of all prayer contained in the Scriptures.



## Community Connections

Catechist invites participants to discuss these or similar questions:

- ▶ In what way does this session on moral decision making impact your life today?
- ▶ Are there any decisions, attitudes, or behaviors in your life that would benefit from a process such as we described today?

Catechist shares an experience from his or her life. See appendix #2.

Catechist informs the group of any parish activity taking place and makes arrangements for group participation. For example:

In light of all that was shared, what is taking place in the parish this week that invites participation of the participants? For example, "This week we are going to assist the diocese in its work with legal and illegal immigrants in Apopka, Florida. There will be a fund drive and a clothing drive to benefit the migrant farm workers' community. What is better than simply collecting money and clothing would be to personally encounter that community. Thus, we are looking for volunteers to take the clothing and help distribute it to those in need."

## Journal

Question for reflection throughout the week: What is the biggest obstacle in my life

when it comes to forming a moral conscience? Why do I need to make the effort to form a moral conscience? What is wrong with the conscience I have right now?

Catechist invites participants to share with one other person.

- ▶ In what way has the Church's teaching on moral decision making invited change in your life?
- ▶ Are there any teachings of the Church with which you struggle?
- ▶ What does today's teaching challenge you to do about it?
- ▶ What are you willing to commit to do about it?
- ▶ In what way does this teaching invite you to more fully live a life of discipleship?



## Closing Prayer

Option 1: If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with Intercessions and Doxology ("Glory be to the Father...") or a minor rite—a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA #90-97.

Option 2: Intercessions. Prayerfully read the Ten Commandments followed by the Beatitudes. End with, "The word of the Lord." ("Thanks be to God.") "Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord." ("Thanks be to God.")

## Appendix

#1. Many years ago, rumors were floating around that the husband of a close friend from my home-town was having an affair. This woman was a woman of faith and a very loyal, faithful wife. I sensed that she was aware of her husband's infidelity, but she remained faithful to him anyway. I eventually received information that the rumors were true. I did not know if I should tell my friend or let her find out on her own, especially in light of the fact that I felt she already knew. Our friendship was at stake. But most importantly I could not decide what was the moral thing to do. Do I tell her and risk the immediate break up of a family? Do I not tell her and let her continue in ignorance and thus continue to be violated? I was at a loss. I prayed about it. I tried to research what my moral responsibility should be.

I finally sought counsel from my parish priest. I needed more than my own wisdom to deal with this situation. In the end my decision was to wait a while and assess the situation further. What if my information was incorrect? As it turned out, I was let off the hook as the situation came to light on its own. Forgiveness and reconciliation followed, and today the couple is still together. What this situation taught me is that such decisions require prayer, research, assessment, and other counsel. I cannot simply act blindly in such situations; they require more of a process than to impulsively respond to the situation. It was an object lesson for me.

#2. My husband and I entered into a moral decision making process. There was an issue that required we make a moral decision concerning the matter. We prayed about it. We earnestly sought the counsel of the Church, we researched Church teaching, we took the time to arrive at our decision, and we prayed some more.

In the end we followed our conscience and what we felt God was calling us to do. We forged ahead in faith. The process was an extended process that took considerable time and effort. At the time we were confident but not absolutely sure that our decision was the correct decision. However, now that we look back on the decision, we see that indeed it was the right thing to do. We trusted the gifts of the Spirit to inform our decision and to help us make the right one for us. Indeed the Spirit responded. It was a lesson for us that forming a moral conscience is not about forming a moral opinion. I can form an opinion with very little input. There is much more to consider and much more at stake in forming a moral conscience.

## Handout on Moral Decision Making

- ▶ Some Catholics of the past had one word to describe the Church, and that word was “institution.” When the Church set out to define itself at the Second Vatican Council, that all changed. The Church Fathers determined that “institution ” is an extremely narrow vision of Church. The Church in its fullness is so much more than an institution.
- ▶ The Church Fathers provided images and metaphors to describe the essence of Church and to keep us from being boxed in to one narrow way of thinking.
- ▶ Such images and metaphors required the use of our imagination. Yet in spite of the effectiveness of such metaphors and images, they are not without limits. While a metaphor comes close to the reality, it never quite *is* the reality.
  
- ▶ Metaphors simply help us unlock the layers of mystery contained within that which the metaphor attempts to describe.
- ▶ Theologians have created certain metaphors that help us explain the many dimensions of morality and our response to it. Many people think that morality is nothing more than a set of rules, regulations, and the necessary requirement to obey them. Morality is so much more than that.
- ▶ Theologians have explored various models to help us understand the way in which our understanding of morality has developed and how we have developed in relation to morality.
- ▶ Legal model. The first metaphor or model is the legal model. This is the oldest model and flows from society’s need to organize itself. Rules help maintain peace and harmony within the society. Rules are to be followed. If they are not followed, there are consequences and punishment.
- ▶ This legal model was and is so ingrained in people’s consciousness that morality became synonymous with the law. Everything was, and for the most part is today, understood by many within the context of the legal system.
  - Within that legal context, therefore, God is the lawgiver and human beings are obliged to obey.
  - Within this legal system there exist divine law and natural law.
  - There are rewards and punishments in the here and the hereafter.
  - The believer must obey.
  - Extreme disobedience results in expulsion from the Church.

### Some limitations to this model

- ▶ Scrupulosity and circumvention. When an institution creates a large body of laws, there is always the presence of two extremes in response to those laws.
- ▶ One extreme is scrupulosity and flows from a fear of not perfectly following the law. (For example, one woman felt she needed to go to the sacrament of reconciliation every day in order to take care of the sins she committed immediately after the sacrament and occurring within that twenty-four hour period.)



- ▶ The other extreme seeks to circumvent the law. Such persons ask how much they can get away with before they commit a sin.
- ▶ The legal system, while nevertheless necessary, also gives rise to other extreme responses. When an institution imposes rigid observance of the law (much like the Pharisees of the New Testament, who required that faithful Jews follow over 600 specific laws, many of them extremely burdensome to poor peasants) the response is often a rebellious questioning of the authority behind the law. The law then is perceived as oppressive and burdensome.
- ▶ Relativism. However, today we are faced with a different extreme response. Some people have relativized the legal nature of the law. For them the law is not the heart of morality; they do not believe that morality should be legislated. The sentiment for them becomes: “No one should tell me what I should or should not do. If I am an adult and it feels right to me, then I am the one who determines if it is right for me or not.” Some see this posture as liberating in that it provides the adult with the freedom to act responsibly and with personal conviction.
- ▶ A truly mature adult, however, comes to understand that while law is not the central component in morality, it is a necessary component of it, a necessary balance to freedom.
- ▶ In spite of some obvious limitations to the legal model of morality, it is important to note that society will always need agreed-upon norms and values that uphold the common good and those norms must and do drive our values.

## Other models of morality

### The Love Model

- ▶ Another model of morality is rooted in love. The gospel mandate to love one another, the two great commandments, is the heart of the Beatitudes, the new law Jesus handed down at his Sermon on the Mount.
- ▶ Such love is directed toward others.
- ▶ Love-based morality insists that the love Jesus taught us by word and example should drive our moral responses to all life situations.
- ▶ However, this model has its limitations. It is not always easy to determine what the most loving action is in a given situation. WWJD (What would Jesus do?) does not always work. Or worse, we use our own criteria of morality and put it squarely on Jesus’ shoulders in order to give divine acceptance to our own narrow (often anti-gospel) way of thinking.
  - For example, a televangelist once used WWJD to defend his support of the death penalty. He failed to consider the reality that Jesus promoted a gospel of non-violence and that he himself was an innocent victim of the death penalty!
- ▶ When confronted with the love model’s limitations, we always revert back to the legal model that we know and that works so well.
- ▶ It is not that the love model is not full of the best intentions; it simply fails us when it comes to determining the right thing to do in many life circumstances.

## The Discipleship Model

- ▶ The discipleship model of morality is based on an intimate, reciprocal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- ▶ Commissioned followers of Christ follow the example of the New Testament and join with other Christians in community to establish the reign of God in their midst.
- ▶ Such a model is a welcomed change from the rigidity of the legal model.
- ▶ Much discernment happens within the context of community as it seeks to live out the gospel in day-to-day life situations.
- ▶ However, just as the love model falls short, there are no clear directives given to address the complex situations that Christians face.
- ▶ What is lacking are concrete answers to what is morally right or wrong.
- ▶ While love and discipleship are good foundations for living the moral life, more is needed.

## The Inner Conviction Model or Moral Conscience Model

- ▶ In this model we joyfully accept personal responsibility for living according to accepted moral norms.
- ▶ When Moses gave the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, we often think that they were given this difficult code by which to order their lives, when in truth the people of Israel understood the Ten Commandments to be their joyful reciprocal response to the love, care, and nurturing shown to them by God, a God with whom they shared a covenant relationship.
- ▶ In this inner conviction or moral conscience model, directives of the law guide us, but we choose to make a personal mature commitment to live by the Law's imperative.
- ▶ The law is not imposed; it is embraced. The law is embraced in response to our love relationship with the God who is in covenant relationship with us.
- ▶ In this model the law drives our values and becomes the basis of our moral decision making, our moral conscience.
- ▶ In this model we do not follow the law out of fear or blind obedience.
- ▶ We follow the law out of a mature commitment to live an authentic life of integrity, a life informed by moral norms that are freely embraced and lived.
- ▶ In this model people act in complete freedom of choice—the freedom to say, “Yes,” to God.
- ▶ Conscience is not simply the tool within us to determine if we should do the right thing and avoid the immoral or wrong thing.
- ▶ Conscience drives our entire approach to life. It helps us discover God's divine design for our lives; it helps us discover who we are, how we are to live, and God's ultimate will for our lives.
- ▶ Conscience is developed (or not) from childhood as we learn to obey the rules and norms of society. It grows and develops as we learn that such norms are for the good of all people and that a well-ordered society is in the best interest of everyone. I follow all the traffic laws not just because it is the law, but because I

care about the welfare of other citizens.

- ▶ Conscience achieves its highest level when we act not because of some obligation to follow the law, but because it is the right and moral thing to do.
- ▶ We develop a good conscience over time by creating the habit of good behavior.
- ▶ When we habitually tell the truth, we become known not just as a truthful person, but we learn to discern truthfulness and the lack of it in specific life situations.
- ▶ The same can be said of all the virtues—justice, prudence, temperance, and courage. We learn those virtues by living them. When we live them and they become a part of our moral fiber, we, in the process, become better persons, not just generally but in relation to each of the virtues. We become prudent, just, temperate, courageous people.
- ▶ Aristotle insisted that morality is judged by the judgment of a morally virtuous person, not simply by a code of law or ethics.

### Forming a good conscience

- ▶ The definition of “conscience” is that it is a “judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete action” (CCC, #1796).
- ▶ God has placed a moral law in every human heart. That moral law is the human conscience. Conscience is our ability to know what is right and what is wrong.
- ▶ Conscience helps us discern what we should do in particular circumstances.
- ▶ Conscience helps persons assume responsibility for their own actions (CCC, #1781).
- ▶ When a person chooses to engage in an evil act, the conscience stands in constant judgment and witness of that act.
- ▶ The human conscience holds out the hope of mercy and forgiveness in admitting to the evil and challenges the person to turn away from evil and turn toward virtue.
- ▶ We make moral choices guided by our conscience. We either follow or we reject God’s law. A good conscience adheres to reason and to what is willed by God’s wisdom.
- ▶ It takes a lifetime to form one’s conscience. Every Catholic is required to form his or her conscience according to the Church’s moral norms.

### What tools are used to form a moral conscience?

- ▶ Scriptures assist us in forming our conscience (CCC, #1785).
- ▶ Do our actions conform to the Word of God?
- ▶ When we pray, study, and live according to biblical principles, we are strengthened to live the moral life; we follow the teaching of Christ in the Scriptures.
- ▶ While a little cliché, overused, and abused (see above), WWJD is nevertheless a wise axiom: What would Jesus do? Such a principle guides our actions.
- ▶ Study is required, however, in accord with biblical interpretation. We can be in error when it comes to Scripture if we read it in a literal, fundamentalist way.
  - For example, there is a scene in the movie “Roots” in which the landowner

is reading the Bible about slaves being obedient to their masters. As he is reading the Bible inside, his runaway slave Toby is having his foot cut off as punishment for running away outside. The landowner is using the Bible as the authority to justify his punitive action. Scripture must be read with the authoritative lens of the Church and biblical interpretation if we are to authentically use it as a tool for discerning our moral actions.

- ▶ Moral counsel of others helps us form our moral conscience.
- ▶ Moral advice and the example of other faithful Christians help us to form our conscience.
- ▶ The authoritative teaching of the Church helps us form a moral conscience.
- ▶ We honestly and with open mind and heart try to embrace the guidance and teaching of the Church, and in so doing we form a moral conscience.
- ▶ Gifts of the Holy Spirit strengthen us to form a moral conscience.
- ▶ We believe those gifts are given to us in the sacrament of confirmation, in which we are given a special outpouring of strength by the Holy Spirit. That strength takes the form of the following gifts:
  - Wisdom: the gift that allows us to grow in faith and embrace divine truth; it allows us to have good judgment about the truth and to meditate on the things of God.
  - Understanding: the gift that helps us understand, grasp, and be certain of our faith—the teachings of our Catholic faith.
  - Counsel: the gift that helps us intuitively know what is right and to have the confidence to courageously defend the truth.
  - Fortitude: the gift that provides the strength to act in accord with the truth, the courage to stand up for what is right even when to do so is difficult.
  - Knowledge: the gift that gifts us with the certitude of the truth of God. Whereas wisdom is the desire to know the truth and things of God, knowledge is actually knowing the truth and the things of God.
  - Piety: the gift whereby the Holy Spirit prompts us to lovingly serve and give honor, praise, and worship to God.
  - Fear of the Lord: the gift that provides us with both a healthy fear that we will turn our backs on God whom we love and do not want to disappoint, and the hope that God's grace will provide the necessary strength to keep us from doing so.
- ▶ Such gifts help us to form our conscience; to know good when we see it; to do good when we are compelled to do good, even when that causes us harm or difficulty; to seek what is right in all things.
- ▶ Examination of conscience helps us to form our moral conscience:
- ▶ This is the frequent and honest examination of our lives, our actions, the motives for our actions, the value of our actions (are they good and upright, or are they unjust, evil, or wrong?), the choices we intend to make, and the choices we have made. Such an evaluation helps us form a moral conscience.



## What constitutes a moral action?

### Moral Acts

- ▶ In order to form a moral conscience, we must understand what constitutes a moral action. Every moral action has three parts:
  1. what we do (the act)
  2. the intention, why we do the act
  3. the actual situation of the act, such as where and when it takes place, how the act is carried out, with whom it is carried out, and the consequences of the act
- ▶ An act is moral if the act is by itself a good thing to do, a good action. (Some things are by nature intrinsically bad, and thus the act itself is not a moral act, such as murder, rape, or torture. The reason for doing such acts makes no difference. The act, in and of itself, is immoral.)
- ▶ An action is morally good if the action itself is a good action and if the person doing the act has a good intention.
- ▶ If the person carries out a good action, but has an evil intention or does it for an evil purpose, it is not a moral action because the person's intention for doing it was evil in the first place. Several examples:
  - A man had an affair with another man's wife. The man having the affair decides to apologize to the other man for having the affair. He makes such an apology in hopes that the man will ultimately leave his wife and the wife will decide to stay with him. The act itself (apologizing and asking for forgiveness) could be classified as a moral action, a good thing. However, it is an immoral action for two reasons. First, the man's intention is to break up the marriage; his intention is evil. Second, the consequences would also result in an evil thing—it would break up a marriage and family. Thus, two out of the three elements that constitute a moral action are evil in and of themselves even though the action itself—forgiveness and apology—could be a good thing.
  - Coworkers ostracize another coworker and make working conditions unbearable for this person. Under the guise of offering a hand of forgiveness and friendship, the coworkers delegate one of their members to reach out to the ostracized worker so as to investigate whether or not this person reported them to management.
- ▶ The Church also insists that we can never do something wrong or evil in order to bring about a good (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, p. 312). The end does not justify the means. A person may not rob a bank to give money to the poor. The act itself was an evil act, even if the intention was good.